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ABSTRACT

Drawing from a review of the literature on feedback in two fields, English education and social psychology, this paper sets forth a set of theoretical conclusions and practical suggestions for developmental English instructors and others to use in providing feedback to composition students. First, the research on written feedback in English classes is reviewed, indicating that while teachers assume that students attend to the feedback they receive on their papers, learn about writing in relation to some ideal goal or next step, and incorporate learning into their future writing efforts, study findings actually show that: (1) teachers often write confusing or superficial comments that focus on surface errors, may be contradictory, and that reflect paternalistic attitudes; (2) students often misunderstand the teachers' feedback; (3) teachers' feedback about essay content is associated with better essays than feedback about language, grammar, and usage; (4) many students do not read their teachers' written feedback, and those who do read the comments seldom use them as guides in revising or writing papers; and (5) students' primary interest is their grade on a given composition, not teacher comments. Next, the paper reviews social psychology research, providing support for the notion that poor-achieving composition students will tend to discredit their teachers' written and oral feedback in order to preserve a positive view of self. The final sections of the paper discuss the implications of the feedback research for composition theory, developmental writing instruction, and further research. (AC)

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Developmental Students' Processing of Teacher Feedback in Composition Instruction

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Not only do developmental writing courses comprise a significant portion of developmental education programs at many colleges, but large numbers of students are enrolled in them. Since a core component of any developmental writing course is the feedback teachers give students about their writing, the nature of that feedback and the use students make of it is a critically important concern for developmental educators and researchers.

This article reviews existing literature regarding feedback in two fields, English education and social psychology, in order to (a) develop a supportable set of suggestions for developmental English instructors and other instructional staff to use when providing feedback to composition students and (b) clarify useful directions for future research. In addition to a review of the literature and accompanying suggestions, theoretical issues are explored as they are relevant to deriving guidelines for practice and future research. This review and the inferences drawn from it are intended as a progress report on the state of our knowledge at this point. Suggestions for practice must be viewed as guidelines, not prescriptions, informing the application of judgment, knowledge, and sensitivity to instructional encounters in developmental English. More research will sharpen our understanding of important concepts and their relationships and more clearly guide practitioners.

Research on Written Feedback in English Education

Teachers' feedback (fb) on students' compositions is an important channel of teacher-student interaction which, if prevalence of practice is an indicator, is widely assumed to be a useful instructional procedure. For this article, the term feedback(fb) refers to the process of providing some commentary on student work in which a teacher reacts to the ideas in print, assesses a student's strengths and weaknesses, and suggests directions for improvement. This feedback is typically written on blank spaces on the students' essays for return to the student or spoken to the student in short conferences. Traditionally, written feedback (wfb) is episodic: Students receive it on the formal occasion of the return of their graded essays. More recently, feedback, both written and oral, is integrated into the writing process: Students receive it as they are working on their compositions (Freedman, 1987; Langer & Applebee, 1987). Regardless of when it is delivered, teachers presume that students attend to the fb; learn about their writing in relation to some ideal goal or a next step, and incorporate this learning into their future writing efforts.

However, an examination of research in the area of teacher fb and student processing of that fb shows that the ideal of teacher-student shared understanding and the development of students' writing skills is at best imperfectly realized in practice: Teachers' fb often lacks thought or depth; students often misunderstand their teachers' fb; the writing skills of students receiving negative fb may actually regress; and many students do not attend to teachers' fb to begin with!

Research examining the qualities of teachers' written feedback on student essays has found that teachers write confusing or superficial comments. Perhaps because they tend to read looking for errors (Heffernan, 1983), teachers tend to mark surface errors (Searle & Dillon, 1980; Cumming, 1985), tend to write "rubberstamped" comments which are neither text specific nor student specific (Sommers, 1982, p. 152), and tend to provide feedback which conflicts with other feedback or which reflects paternalistic attitudes (Grant-Davie & Shapiro, 1987).

Not surprisingly, then, students frequently misunderstand — and therefore fail to benefit from — their teachers' feedback. Butler (1980) suggests that a teacher's written "squiggles" may be meaningful for the teacher but uninterpretable for the student. Sperling (1985) reports that, even in classrooms in which current research is being applied to practice, teacher feedback is misunderstood. Often, teachers' feedback is associated with negative attitudes (Grant-Davie & Shapiro, 1987). Sperling and Freedman (1987), in a case study of one writing teacher and one of his students, report a lack of shared understandings about the meaning of the student's writing and what there-

fore could be commented on. Hayes and Daiker (1984) demonstrate that college freshmen had trouble interpreting the teacher's comments—despite the teacher's knowledge of contemporary process-oriented approaches to the teaching of writing. Ziv (1984) suggests that teachers' feedback to student writers reflects teachers' misunderstandings of their students' writing.

On the positive side, Olsen and Raffeld (1987) report that teachers' feedback concerning essay content is associated with better essays than feedback concerning essay language, grammar, and usage. Grant-Davie and Shapiro (1987) report that lengthier comments are less effective than shorter ones. In addition, as compared to positive comments, several researchers report that negative comments are related to less desirable student attitudes about aspects of the writing process (Gee, 1972; Hausner, 1975; Stevens, 1973; Taylor & Hoedt, 1966).

Given that teachers' feedback to students' writing seems to be unclear, misunderstood, and ineffective, it shouldn't surprise any of us to hear that many researchers suggest that (a) feedback, especially in written form, does not make much of a difference in improving students' writing, and (b) students don't seem to pay much attention to it anyway. Cohen (1987), Marzano and Arthur (1977), and Zamel (1985) have each reported that many students do not read their teachers' wfb. Those who do read the comments seldom used them as guides in revising existing papers or writing new papers.

Why Don't Students Attend to Feedback?

It's important to understand *why* students don't pay attention to teachers' feedback. Obviously, understanding the psychological and emotional mechanisms which underlie students' ignoring or rejecting of teachers' fb provides direction for instructional practice as well as future research.

The grade one receives may determine the attention one gives to the fb. Cohen (1987) for example, reports that students' primary interest is their grade on a given composition, not the teacher's comments. A poor grade may discourage a student from reading the feedback while a good grade may encourage a student to read the feedback. Other research on students' reactions to positive and negative fb provides some evidence for the suggestion that students receiving poor grades on their compositions may be gaining less from teachers' comments than students receiving higher grades (Gee, 1972; Hausner, 1975; Stevens, 1973; Taylor & Hoedt, 1966).

The result may be a cycle of impoverishment in which psychological processes of avoidance and disassociation impede the development of poor writers while psychological processes of accommodation and assimilation propel the development of more skilled writers. Such an interpretation is based in Gestalt theories of learning (e.g., Wertheimer, 1959; Kohler, 1969; Koffka, 1935; Greeno, 1978; Scandura, 1975) When integrated with current writing research on teacher wfb, Gestalt theory suggests that the composition student will attend to the grade first. If the grade is low, then the student will experience cognitive tension and will likely attempt to reduce this tension by discrediting the fb. It further suggests that composition students are likely to have one overall reaction, not a separate set of possibly conflicting reactions, to a teacher's fb and that this reaction will determine the degree to which students accept the teacher's fb.

Social Psychological Research on Feedback

Results of studies on feedback in social psychology further support the notion that poorer achieving composition students, to preserve a positive view of self, will tend to discredit their teachers' wfb, ironically resulting in continued poor achievement. The additional significance of social psychological research on feedback is that it has tended to utilize oral feedback not written. These results, taken as whole, suggest that students will react to oral feedback in similar ways to their reactions to written feedback.

Social psychological research on fb has indicated that valence, that is a positive/negative dimension, most strongly influences one's acceptance of it. Researchers have found that both the receiver (Jacobs, Jacobs, Feldman, & Cavior, 1973) and the giver (Tesser, Rosen, & Tesser, 1971) prefer positive fb over negative. Positive fb is also rated by receivers as more accurate and useful than negative (Jacobs, 1977; Jacobs, Jacobs, Gatz, & Schaible, 1973; Jacobs, Jacobs, Feldman, & Cavior, 1973).

Knowing that fb usually contains negative as well as positive comments, social psychological researchers have investigated whether a positive-negative or negative-positive sequence is more highly related to receivers' ratings of fb accuracy and usefulness. The results have been inconclusive. Jacobs, Jacobs, Feldman, and Cavior (1973) reported that a negative-positive fb sequence was related to higher recipient ratings then a positive-negative sequence. In other research, however, a positive-negative sequence resulted in higher ratings than a negative-positive sequence (Schaible & Jacobs, 1975; Stockton & Moran, 1981).

Perhaps conflicting results about sequence of positive and negative fb indicate that sequence just doesn't make that much of a difference in regard to ratings. Perhaps, as suggested earlier, the underlying cognitive processes are integrative, in which positive and negative fb are combined into an *overarching cognitive structure* resulting in a single, *overarching reaction* to the fb.

A recent study by MacDonald (1990) investigated just this question. Results showed no effect for positive-negative sequence and a significant effect between an expected score-actual score ratio and students' ratings of the feedback. As compared to students scoring at or above their expected levels, those students scoring lower than they expected gave lower ratings of the accuracy and usefulness of the fb they received. Apparently, the sequence of the

positive and negative aspects of the fb is not as important as one's overall assessment of the fb in relation to grades and expectations about grades.

Implications

Theory

There are four implications of this research for composition theory. First students' reaction to their teachers' evaluations would seem to be a gestalt process: Students have an overall reaction to their performance, not a set of discrete reactions to discrete components of the teacher's wfb. In initial encounters between teachers and students in college composition classrooms, students' overall reaction to their performance as evaluated by the teacher determines the degree to which shared meaning about the fb can be constructed. This effect may be mitigated by a trusting relationship between teachers and students. It's also possible that, as time passes, students' initial negative reactions to fb are reduced. Researchers need to investigate each of these possibilities.

Second, cognitive processes seem to produce a cycle of impoverishment for students who are disappointed by their level of achievement on writing assignments. Just as the ancient king killed the messenger for reporting a disastrous loss in battle, the student "kills" the teacher's message because it so displeasing. At least in the short term, our desire for a positive view of self leads to a discounting of the message, rather than a changing of our perception of self, and, unfortunately, rejecting the enriching message maintains the student's level of impoverishment in writing.

Third, the research reported here supports a socio-cognitive theory of writing. Because fb occurs as a part of teaching-learning interaction in which both the teacher and the student contribute to the accomplishment of meaning (Freedman, 1987), it is both a social and a cognitive process centering on collaboration (Leontiev, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, Minick, & Arns, 1984). The social component of socio-cognitive theory is concerned with communicative competence; how successfully we communicate with others (Hymes, 1974). The cognitive component refers to a set of distinctive thinking processes which a writer manages and applies in the act of composing (Flower & Hayes, 1981).

Fourth, Freedman and Sperling (1985) have extended socio-cognitive theory into a conceptualization of teacher-student interaction regarding teachers' fb on students' compositions. They have defined a response round, which consists of (a) a student's text, (b) teacher's response, (c) student's reaction to that response, and sometimes (d) the student's subsequent revisions. In that teachers' fb is a form of response, the research reported here suggests that Sperling and Freedman's notion of a response round might then be rewritten as follows (changes are underlined) (a) a student's text; (b) <u>a students' expectation about performance;</u> (c) a teacher's response; (d) a student's reaction to that response; (e) the student learning about writing; (f) <u>a student's ability to apply this knowledge to future writing tasks;</u> and (g) a student's subsequent revisions.

Practice

Optimum instruction in developmental writing courses requires strengthening the communication between teachers and students first by reinforcing students' processing of wfb in spite of the students' disappointment, second by examining the qualities of teachers' comments, and third by questioning the simultaneous delivery of grades and comments.

Attending to and learning from fb should be an ongoing process, not merely a series of discrete traumatic events. To increase students' processing of fb, teachers should provide activities which reinforce students' attention to it. For example, students might be asked to write summaries of the main points of their teachers' fb. Perhaps the impact of a disappointing grade could be partially mitigated by having each student summarize the teacher's fb on another student's composition. Students might then articulate goals for their performance on the next assignment based on their understanding of the fb received to date. In addition, students might be asked to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their own and others' work while it is being written and as it is submitted. Students might benefit from the opportunity to discuss their self-assessments, the teacher's assessments, and the tension which may exist when these assessments misalign. Active involvement in evaluating, being evaluated, and discussing feelings may reduce the negative impact of the teachers' evaluation and help students understand the value of fb.

Further, students may perceive teachers' positive comments as the sugar coating on a bitter pill. The sugar coating has no purpose or value other than to make the "true" message more palatable. If so, students may not attend to reinforcement of what they are doing well and so may not learn to keep doing it. Activities can be developed which require the student to focus on the positive aspects of the fb. For example, students could list their strengths and identify particular passages where those strengths are evident. They could discuss ways to utilize their strengths to address their weaknesses. In small groups, they can identify strengths in each other's papers. Students could be identified as in-class "consultants" according to their individual strengths on certain aspects of the writing process and be available to provide assistance to their peers. Every student could be a consultant on some aspect of the writing process. However, not all of the responsibility for improving students' understanding of teachers' comments should rest with the student.

The final instructional implication of this research involves changing some fundamental patterns of instruction in developmental English classes. Despite research showing the futility of correcting essays after they are completed, the practice persists. We must shake loose from the assumption that grading students' work and commenting on it necessarily occur at the same time. Traditionally, each student paper receives a grade and wfb, resulting in a system in which two very different kinds of teaching are forced together: formal evaluation, which produces a grade intended to let a student know how well she or he is doing in relation to some standard, and personalized instruction,

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which provides fb intended to help a student learn. The study reported here suggests that the student displeased with the formal evaluation will discredit the personalized instruction. As other researchers have suggested (e.g., Freedman, 1985; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1984), the evaluation of a student's work should be separated from personalized instruction. Researchers and practitioners have developed instructional methods, appropriate for developmental college students, which separate formal evaluation from personalized instruction. These include conferencing (Freedman, 1985; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1984; Witte, Meyer, Miller, & Faigley, 1981), grading portfolios of accumulated work rather than single finished essays (Murray, personal communication, April 4, 1989), and peer or cross-age tutoring (Brown, Palincsar, & Purcell, 1986; MacDonald, 1988; Palincsar & Brown, 1984).

Research

Teachers' naturally occurring fb should be content analyzed with particular attention to the characteristics of the messages treating deficiencies as compared to the characteristics of the messages which treat strengths. Teachers' comments on student deficiencies may be more specific and focused, more clearly tied to specific parts of the students' text, and more extensive than the same teachers' comments on student accomplishments. If so, then teachers inadvertently are training students to attend to the negative aspects of the fb at the expense of the positive. Perhaps compared to their better performing peers, poorer performers may receive more negative and less positive fb from their teachers.

Researchers should continue to explore the relationships between received grades, students' reactions to grades, the characteristics of teachers' naturally occurring fb to students, students' reactions to the fb, the type of relationship between the teacher and the student, and their shared history. It might be particularly useful to directly compare students' processing of fb in different instructional conditions. Students may attend more carefully to fb when the grade and the feedback are separated. Under some instructional conditions compared to others, students may be more aware of or better able to accurately recall previously given fb and thus able to apply it to subsequent assignments.

Attention should be given also to the following areas: the changes over time in students' reactions; the relationships between their reactions and their learning and performance; the characteristics of teachers' naturally occurring fb; and the influences of those characteristics on student reactions to, student retention of, and student subsequent use of fb to assist future writing efforts in the same class.

Conclusion

The connection between response and learning is a richly complex array of processes which can function to promote nearly ideal instruction and learning or deteriorate to a dysfunctional morass. This review indicates that students' initial reactions to grades can obstruct their acceptance of accompanying information, that students have one overall reaction to the teacher's wfb, and that these reactions are unaffected by students' gender or the positive-negative sequencing of the wfb.

Compared to their more highly skilled peers, less skilled writers are more likely to write poorly and are consequently more likely to receive negative fb from their teachers. Therefore, less skilled writers may suffer the harshest consequences of the confusion between teacher fb and student understanding in that those who may need to learn the most from teacher fb may be learning the least. If we are aware of factors contributing to this result and if we can change traditional patterns of developmental instruction in writing, then we may give developmental students the power to clearly and thoughtfully express their ideas and feelings and question and define their worlds.

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